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ABSTRACT

Presumably the differences in multicultural texts are in part or entirely attributable to the race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and nationality of the writer. As college populations have changed to resemble more closely the writers of "multicultural" literature, instructors have become more interested in teaching literature written by minority or women writers. Although there is no recommended curriculum for the required series of literature and composition courses at the University of California, Berkeley, the English Department's most frequently taught texts are Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Woman Warrior," Richard Rodriguez's "Hunger of Memory," and anything by Toni Morrison. Only by showing the discourses among authors of all identities can students learn how to build their own bridges. This building of bridges with texts between the marginal and the mainstream extends between the Gothic horror genre and the more mainstream literature; it is also important to the positioning of stories within the discourse of Gothic horror itself. Toni Morrison's "Beloved," for example, can be taught as a Gothic horror novel. Gothic horror, like any other genre, has its conventions--it invokes the tyranny of the past with such weight as to stifle the hopes of the present. By studying how different authors interact with genre conventions, composition students can better understand the conventions of the genre they are studying--that of the college essay--and see how they can both write within that genre and also use their understanding of those conventions to accommodate their own voices. (Includes 8 notes.) (CR)

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From Milton to Morrison: The Gothic in *Beloved*

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The words "mainstream" and "multicultural" are bandied about so often in discussions of composition and literature that we have almost convinced ourselves that we know what they mean. Presumably, the differences in the texts themselves are in part or entirely attributable to the race, gender, sexual orientation, class and nationality of the writer. "Mainstream" or "canonical" writing has come to mean texts produced by straight white men, best if quite cold in their graves. Across what has become a very great divide is "multicultural" writing, again defined by the identity of the writer--race, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth.

As college populations have changed to resemble more closely the writers of "multicultural" literature, instructors have become more interested in teaching literature written by minority or women writers. An example of this change can be clearly seen at the University of California at Berkeley. Although there is no mandatory, or even recommended curriculum for the required series of literature and composition courses at UC Berkeley, in the English Department the most frequently taught texts are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* and of course anything by Toni

Morrison. It seems that a new canon is being shaped, a canon that is more inclusive than that of the "mainstream" in years past.

However, just as this new canon has whole heartedly embraced texts and authors previously marginalized, other texts and authors necessarily have been pushed to the margins. After all, there is only so much time in the course of a quarter or a semester; to include certain texts requires the exclusion of others. What are the criteria that we are using to select these texts?

No doubt, we are not merely selecting texts for teaching composition based solely on the identity of the author; surely rhetorical virtuosity, style, and well-crafted characters and plots, enter into our decisions. But there are other factors: how accessible is a text? Will it be popular in the classroom, or cause days or even weeks of painful silences during class discussion? Will students engage with the text, or will writing about it be a chore-- thus producing an essay that's a chore for its reader as well.

Including texts from a wide variety of authors helps to ensure that students engage with at least one text in a course. However, we are implicitly condescending to students when we choose texts for study based solely on how popular they might be or how relevant we think they may be to a student's life. Should students read texts as if they were looking into a mirror, only to see themselves looking back? Can students only read and enjoy literature about people and events that they and we perceive to be like their own?

Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*, says that "education is all a matter of building bridges."[1] The curricula we design cannot ignore multicultural writing, any more than they can ignore more mainstream writing, if we are to be building these educational bridges. We should

be showing students where bridges already exist in discourse, and how they can build their own bridges between their own ideas and others' by developing their skills as readers, writers and critical thinkers. Only by showing the discourses between authors of all identities can students learn how to build their own bridges.

I must admit that when constructing the curriculum for my own reading and composition courses, I was not considering questions such as these; I had in mind no specific bridges to be built. I decided to teach Gothic horror stories because I had always found them interesting and rewarding to read, both as a student and as part of my leisure reading. The choice seemed apropos; students who are not planning a humanities major may anticipate their composition courses to be the most horrific of their college careers. But what I have discovered is that teaching a genre of literature, such as Gothic horror, provides an excellent way of bridging the gap between mainstream and multicultural literature.

Stephen King argues that "the horror story, beneath its fangs and fright wig, is really as conservative as an Illinois Republican in a three-piece pinstriped suit; that its main purpose is to reaffirm the virtues of the norm by showing us what awful things happen to people who venture into taboo lands."[2] Certainly awful things happen in Gothic horror tales, but what are the boundaries of these "taboo lands"? Some Gothic stories do indeed "reaffirm the virtues of the norm," but they also question what in fact is a virtue, what constitutes a norm in an ever-changing society. It's hard to agree, then, that the main purpose of horror is to reaffirm the virtues of the norm; just as often, these norms constitute what is so horrific.

Gothic horror, like any other genre, has its conventions. Chris Baldick, in his introduction to an anthology of Gothic tales, has attempted to outline some of these conventions: "typically a

Gothic tale will invoke the tyranny of the past (a family curse, the survival of archaic forms of despotism and of superstition) with such weight as to stifle the hopes of the present (the liberty of the heroine or hero) within the dead-end of physical incarceration (the dungeon, the locked room, or simply the confinements of a family house closing in on itself)."[3] It has attracted such conventional writers such as Henry James, Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. However, writers who might more typically be read and studied as part of a multicultural or feminist course of study have also explored using Gothic horror and its conventions; writers such as Mary Shelley, Isabel Allende, and Toni Morrison.

These writers not only confront the tyranny of past injustices in their works, but also the tyrannies of earlier conventions and writers that would seem to be validating or even creating King's "virtues of the norm." These and other Gothic horror writers explore the effect of other writers within and outside of the Gothic traditions, reacting against them or subtlety questioning them. Exploring Gothic horror as a genre gives students literary examples of other writers exploring the conventional motifs of a genre, but also using those motifs to question and expand our understanding of that genre. By studying how different authors interact with the conventions of a genre, students of composition can better understand the conventions of the genre they themselves are studying--that of the college essay--and see how they can both write within that genre and also use their understanding of those conventions to accommodate their own voices.

There are many ways to explore how writers both use and resist the conventions of a genre. I'd like now to explore three examples of such intertextual references that my class has studied in the Gothic horror tradition that have helped to place the works we've studied not in

separate categories of "mainstream" or "multicultural" writing, but as part of a larger frame of discourse that is Gothic horror writing.

I generally begin the semester with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus*. Though it is not the first Gothic horror novel--*The Castle of Otranto*, written by Horace Walpole in 1764 holds that claim--it is a story that every student thinks he or she knows already. The story of Victor Frankenstein and his Creature run amok has become a kind of myth of our own time, a cautionary tale against science overstepping natural boundaries. The novel, however, is positioned within the debates of its own time, exploring and critiquing Romanticism, the ideals of the Enlightenment, among others.

Whereas the modern pop culture versions of *Frankenstein* focus on the moment Victor bestows life upon the Creature and the Creature's howling rampage afterwards, the actual process of creation is described in a few brief lines in the novel. The novel focusses on what the nature of the Creature might be--and therefore what the nature of the relationship between the Creature and his creator might be. Abandoned by Victor after being brought to life, the Creature becomes a model of the "noble savage," the "natural man" hypothesized by Locke, Rousseau, and others. With no parents to instruct him, the self-taught Creature turns to literature in his quest --Plutarch, Goethe, and most importantly, Milton--to understand himself and his place in human society.

The Creature looks to the characters of *Paradise Lost*, and finds only two options for himself: human or devil. In a cruel parody of Eve's entrancement with herself in a pool in *Paradise Lost*, when the Creature sees himself in a pool for the first time, he "became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am."[4] When appealing to Victor for a mate, his own "Eve," the Creature asks that Victor "remember that I am thy Creature; I ought to be thy

Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom though drivest from joy for no misdeed."[5] The Creature's desire to change his status from devil to human being is an exploration into Satan's dilemma in *Paradise Lost*. My students look at passages from *Paradise Lost* to learn more about the Creature--if they can see how the Creature is interpreting *Paradise Lost*, they feel they have a better understanding of whether or not his soul is human, as he insists, or monstrous, as his appearance would imply. Upon discovering this connection between *Frankenstein* and *Paradise Lost*, students develop independently an interest in the linkages between these texts. Every semester, I need to dissuade at least one student from the daunting task of comparing and contrasting *Frankenstein* with all of *Paradise Lost*. *Frankenstein*, a fascinating novel in its own right, encourages students to explore the discourses that surround and influence it.

This building of bridges with texts between the marginal and the mainstream extends between the Gothic and more mainstream literature; it is also important to the positioning of stories within the discourse of Gothic horror itself. Latina author Isabel Allende is generally known for her use of magic realism in her novels and stories, the best known being *The House of the Spirits*. The magic realist style can be closely akin to that of Gothic horror, and Allende's story "If You Touched My Heart," part of her story anthology *The Stories of Eva Luna*, invokes the Gothic tradition through its references to what is perhaps the most well known of all Gothic horror tales, Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." In Poe's story, the hypersensitive Roderick Usher entombs his twin sister Madeline alive. In Allende's, Amadeo Peralta, a South American thief turned landowner, entombs a metaphoric twin, Hortensia, in a dank cellar for decades. The suggested incest in both stories and the discovery of the entombed women brings about the destruction of both men's literal and metaphorical houses.

Allende announces the connection of her story to Poe's through its very title, which is a revision of the epigraph to "The Fall of the House of Usher." In English the epigraph by French poet de Beranger reads, "His heart is a suspended lute; If one touches it, it resounds." The sensitive heart alluded to in the epigraph is that of the hypersensitive Roderick. But whose heart is being touched in Allende's story "If You Touched My Heart"? Certainly not the indifferent Peralta's, who nearly forgets Hortensia in her hole. If the heart is Hortensia's, then we are forced into an uneasy identification with a woman who is characterized as being nearly an imbecile, devoted to Peralta despite his indifference. Studying both stories side by side shows how Allende plays with the generic conventions of the Gothic horror story, and presents students with difficult questions: what is the role of women in both stories? How do wealth and power affect these roles? How can we understand Allende's story when viewed both as part of a Gothic horror tradition and as a story by a Latina about Latin American society? The juxtaposition of these stories forces students to look at both more carefully, and to question the gaps and intersections of mainstream and multicultural literature.

Perhaps the most important Gothic novel of our century is usually not even considered as such. Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is often taught either as part of the larger American novel tradition or as a modern fictionalization of a slave narrative. Indeed, Morrison herself says that the inspiration for *Beloved* was an article in a nineteenth-century magazine about a fugitive slave who tries to her children in order to save them from slavery. There are so many contexts in which to consider *Beloved*, and its subject matter alone would make it seem ideally suited to be taught as part of a multicultural or feminist curriculum. Why then teach it as a Gothic novel?

Considering *Beloved* as a Gothic novel does not diminish its importance as a novel about the horrific effects of slavery and its aftermath; it's impossible to read the novel without addressing these issues. However, understanding Gothic conventions assists students in understanding and appreciating Morrison's stylistic techniques. The beginning of a slave narrative appeals to reality and factualness; in the preface to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for example, the author Harriet A. Jacobs is at pains to establish the truth of her narrative: "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true."[6] The preface is followed by a letter from the editor attesting to the narrator's credibility. In contrast, the beginning of *Beloved* is confusing, and intentionally so: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom."[7] What is 124, how can it be spiteful, and how can a baby be venomous? Morrison has said of the opening lines of *Beloved* that, "the *in medias res* opening that I am so committed to is here excessively demanding. It is abrupt, and should appear so. No native informant here. The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign."[8] Whereas reading *Beloved* in the context of African American writing and slave narratives has the advantage of helping students understand factually and thematically what is happening in the novel, they do not necessarily prepare them for the ambiguities of a red light, a haunted house that shakes, an empty dress holding a woman, a woman who may or may not be a dead baby brought back from the dead. Having studied the conventions of the Gothic genre, I have found students to be more patient as they try to unravel the spirit and political worlds of *Beloved*. Though they may quickly forget that it is a Gothic novel, drawing on the generic conventions used by Shelley, Poe, Hawthorne and others, knowing these conventions helps students to understand the stylistic devices used initially in the novel and

what they could possibly mean.

I have tried to show here how small the gap between multicultural and mainstream literature really is if instead of teaching texts based on what side they may fall on an imaginary divide we instead examine them as a part of a larger discourse, one where the mainstream and the multicultural are constantly converging and commenting on one another, where the canon is not so canonical any more as it adapts to the conventions and challenges of literary discourse. We can only teach a tiny portion of the larger discourse; although I have chosen Gothic horror as a genre to examine and challenge, other discourses could be used for the same purpose: to show how writing is not oppositional between opposing camps but a constant conversation between writers, between conventions and innovations. By seeing literature as a conversation, where readers and writers join in, comment on what's been said before but moving the discussion in different directions, students can explore how they too can join the conversation, to build their own bridges.

Notes

1. Ralph Ellison, "What These Children Are Like," in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987) 66.
2. Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1981) 395.
3. Chris Baldick, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) xix.
4. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996) 76.
5. Shelley 66.
6. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) 1.

7. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: New American Library, 1987) 3.

8. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." Delivered by Morrison at the University of Michigan, 1988.

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